



The art of travel is packing light, but on this photo shoot my best bit of kit is a twin-engine aircraft weighing just under three tonnes. Our glorious outback landscapes are a national treasure, second only to the characters who live among them. Words and pictures by Ewen Bell.

COME FLY WITH ME



IMAGES

Desert bloom at Parachilna (top left)

» Shot with Canon 1D MkIV; 1/320sec; Aperture priority; f/3.5; ISO 400

Prepare to board

» Shot with Canon 1D MkIV; 1/500sec; Aperture priority; f/11; ISO 200

Kimberley cruising

» Shot with Canon 1D MkIV; 1/640sec; Aperture priority; f/11; ISO 400

Home Valley boab

» Shot with Canon 5D MkII; 1/80sec; Aperture priority; f/13; ISO 400

“A more diverse collection of inspiration is hard to imagine, packed into a very intense two-week schedule”



■ **Prepare to board**
What better way to shoot the outback?

Air Adventure Australia operates a small collection of flying journeys, and have done so since the 1970s. Their definition of luxury is pretty simple; get as far off the beaten track as possible, make sure everybody is pampered for food and wine, and keep the group size down to whatever fits into a very small plane. I packed as many lenses as possible into my Flipside 400 and headed into the clouds.

Our flight path crosses the entire country, starting in Melbourne and heading for the Red Centre before touching down on the Kimberley coast. In one direction we visit Coober Pedy and the unique characters who dig opal out of the ground, shoot some wildlife at dawn on the floodplains of the Mary River, and spend morning tea with the Tiwi Islanders. On the route home we find boab trees and stockmen at Home Valley Station, get a taste of modern Indigenous art, and spend a night on the edge of Wilpena Pound where the emus and wallabies run wild.

A more diverse collection of inspiration is hard to imagine, packed into a very intense two-week schedule.

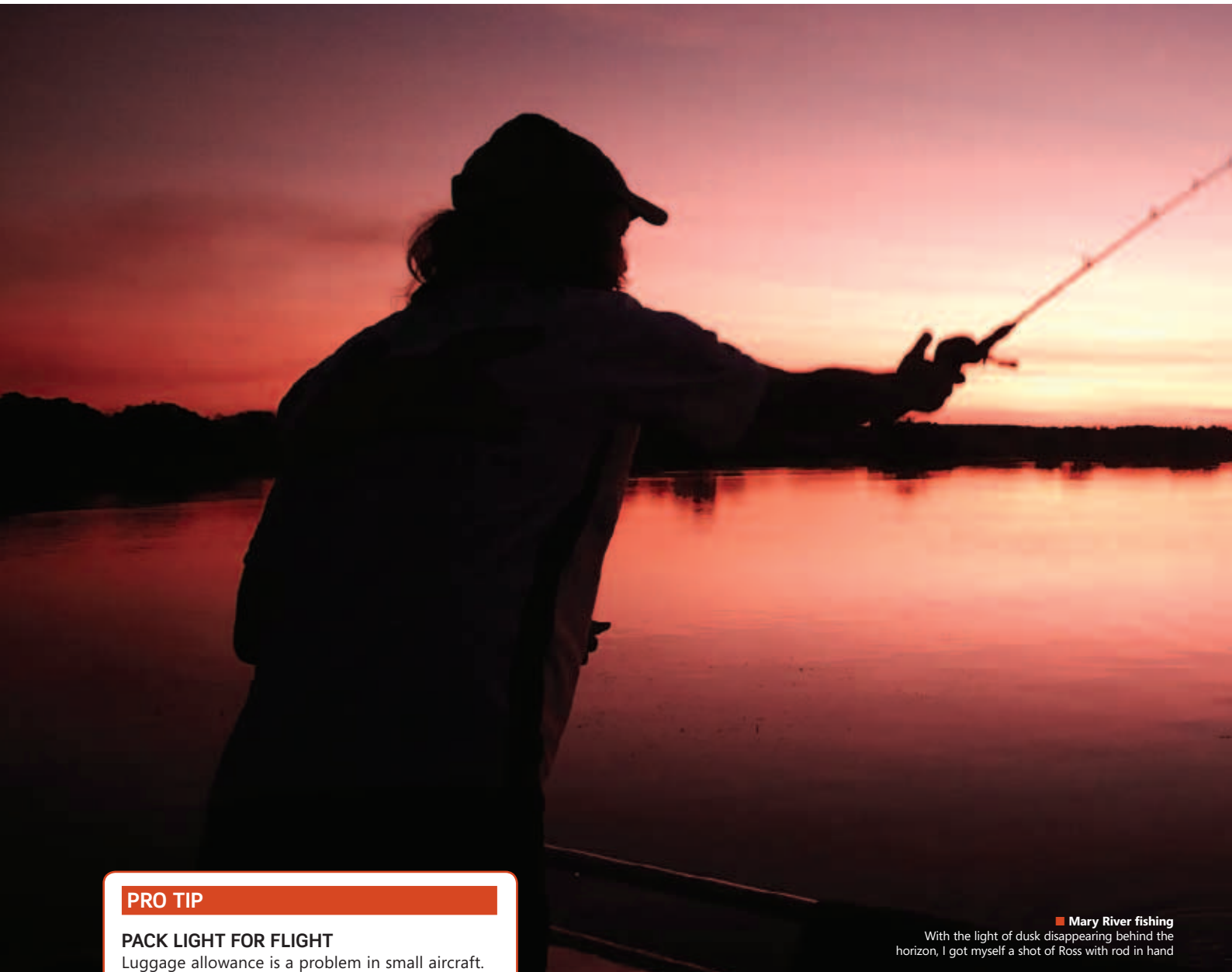
Most of my photographic assignments are geographically narrow, and I have to wrangle every drop of inspiration to make the most of it. This was the opposite, like catching a flood of images that just tumble over a waterfall, trying to avoid being knocked sideways by the downpour. I found myself falling asleep during short hops in the aircraft, recharging my mental batteries before being dropped into the next scenic landscape.

Something about the logistics of light aircraft travel lends itself to photography. Our pilot prefers a good sleep-in each morning, so I've plenty of time to enjoy the morning light before packing up and moving on. Most pilots also care little for short landing strips in fading light, so sunset with a drop of bubbly is frequently on the cards. Our airtime between towns is typically scheduled during the middle of the day when the light is a little harsh for the best of photographic inspiration.

While iconic destinations are essential for a journey such as this,



■ **Home Valley boab**
Iconic symbol of WA's northwest



PRO TIP

PACK LIGHT FOR FLIGHT

Luggage allowance is a problem in small aircraft. It's not even an issue of weight, rather the limited space to hide away baggage. This isn't the sort of trip you want to be toting a Pelican case, rather a well-padded daypack that can ride with the bumps of rough landings and bouncy jeep rides.

■ Mary River fishing

With the light of dusk disappearing behind the horizon, I got myself a shot of Ross with rod in hand



■ Saltwater croc

One of the more compelling reasons to take a very long lens

IMAGES

Mary River fishing

» Shot with Canon 5D MkII; 1/100sec; Aperture priority; f/6.3; ISO 3200

Saltwater croc

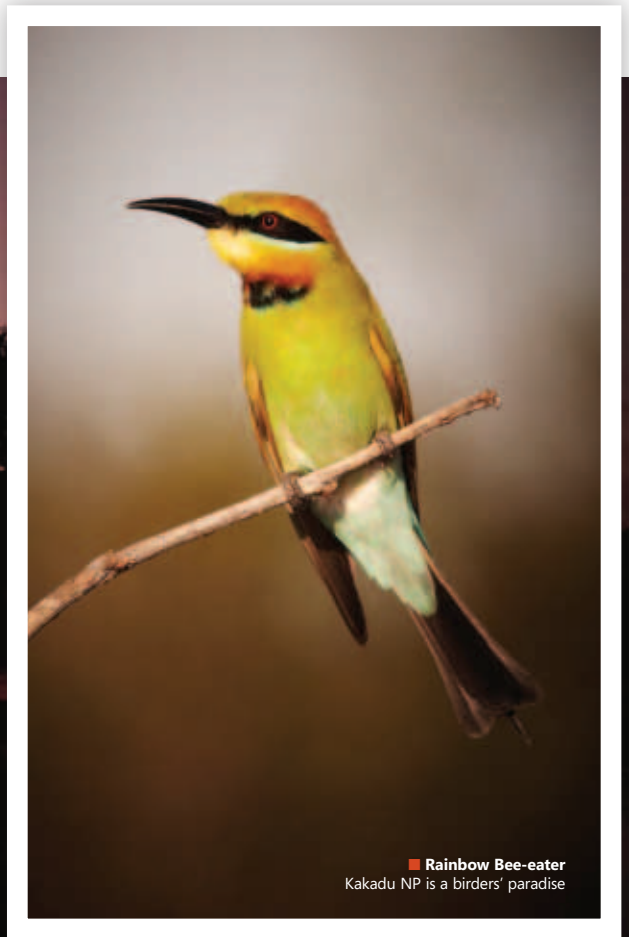
» Shot with Canon 5D MkII; 1/1600sec; Aperture priority; f/2.8; ISO 400

Rainbow

Bee-eater
» Shot with Canon 5D MkII; 1/500sec; Aperture priority; f/11; ISO 400

Bush cuppa, anyone?

» Shot with Canon 5D MkII; 1/1000sec; Aperture priority; f/2.8; ISO 400



■ **Rainbow Bee-eater**
Kakadu NP is a birders' paradise

“I’ve been up to the Top End a dozen times and rarely have I seen such a beautiful location for photographing birds, in the wet or the dry”

the lesser-known stops are the ones that make it special. Parachilna is a town that few people will have heard of unless you’ve driven north of Adelaide to see Lake Eyre, and it’s here I meet Ross and Jane Fargher, who own the Prairie Hotel. The old sandstone pub along the railway tracks has been restored and extended under their care, and now serves gourmet cuisine that takes full advantage of the hardy wildlife found around the salt lakes.

Every day at sundown, a handful of travellers sit outside the Prairie Hotel to watch the last light turn to gold. Galahs make a ruckus in the treetops and the red and white stripes of the hotel awning add a little more colour for photographers. Once the stars come out, the only galahs still making noise are those drinking at the bar.

Ross and Jane made their living farming sheep but have made their mark with the Prairie Hotel. This landmark of historic significance was in danger of

falling apart, but the Farghers restored the original construction and made architecturally sensitive additions to ensure the success of the business. It’s clear Ross put more money into the pub than he did his old tour bus, and we spend a day rattling around the western edge of Wilpena Pound. A brand new bus wouldn’t last long out here anyway. Dry riverbeds lined with gum trees provide muted colours for the camera, upstaged by brilliant wildflowers hidden in the scrub.

Ross shares more than the scenery though, and we make a visit to the family woolsheds. Magnificent timber floors are coated with a century of lanolin, fresh off the sheep’s back. While the wool is growing in the paddocks, the sheds lie empty and still, so we rummage through the calm in search of light and composition. Ross is a photogenic fellow himself and with a little encouragement we get some portrait poses set against the shearing runs.



■ **Bush cuppa, anyone?**
About as Aussie a travel experience as you can muster



“You don’t take portraits of Bruce just standing around with nothing to do; he’s a man of action”

These personalities add a whole new dimension to the outback, and we meet new characters at every stop.

On the wilds of the Kimberley coast we meet the stoic figure of Bruce Ellison, who established Faraway Bay in spite of the remote location – 500km from a road, this outpost of hospitality is serviced by small aircraft, all landing on a dusty air strip that Bruce carved out of the bush using chains and a beaten up Landcruiser. You don’t take portraits of Bruce just standing around with nothing to do; he’s a man of action and that has to be part of the shot.

A few hours of flight time from Faraway Bay is the cattle station at Home Valley, where Indigenous ranch hands like Cyril Yeeda work their trade against a backdrop of boabs and the Cockburn Ranges.

Cyril calls himself a trainee, but in truth he’s a natural born to work with horses, possessing a gentle nature that can be elusive on film. I have to wait for a quiet moment, ideally when he’s more focused on the horse than my camera.

In Coober Pedy the man of the moment was Gunther Wagner, a German-born photographer who traded his Leica for a shovel back in the 1960s. Speaking with a deep accent and sharing stories of his “lucky schtone”, I became lost in the endless collection of Gunter’s adventures since arriving in town. He’s a builder, a driver, entrepreneur, tour guide, gem dealer, golfer and much more. I never did get the shot I wanted. I need to figure out who he really is before trying capture his portrait.

IMAGES

Silky smooth

» Shot with Canon 5D MkII; 6.0sec; Manual; f/13; ISO 100

All in a tangle

» Shot with Canon 5D MkII; 1/4000sec; Aperture priority; f/2.2; ISO 100

Taking flight

» Shot with Canon 5D MkII; 1/500sec; Aperture priority; f/10; ISO 400

Mary River lotus

» Shot with Canon 5D MkII; 1/8000sec; Aperture priority; f/2.8; ISO 800



PRO TIP

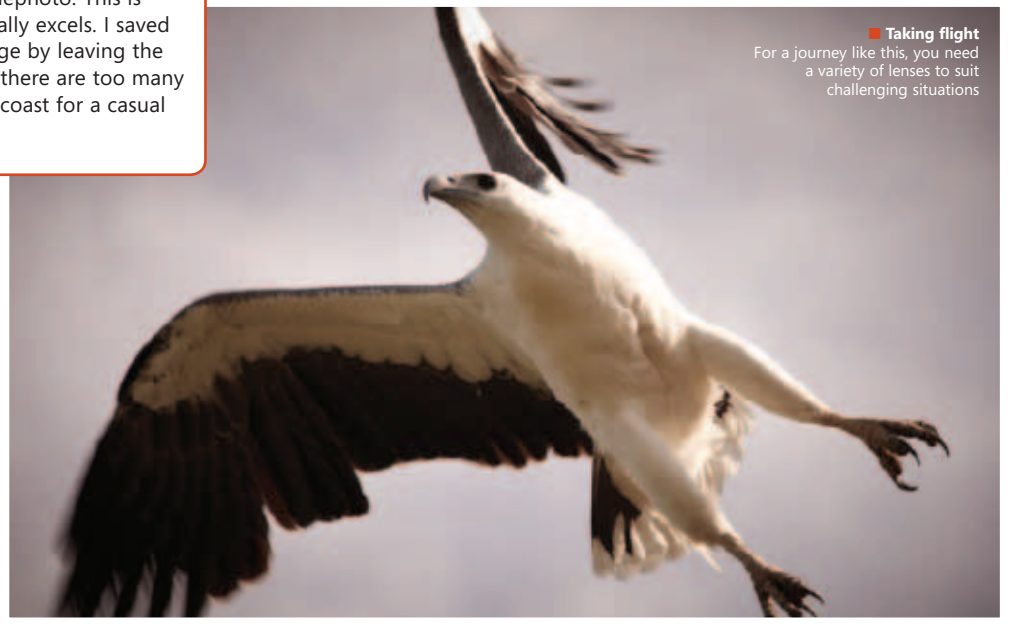
WHAT'S IN THE BAG?

Such a diverse journey offers opportunity for landscapes, sunrise, wildlife and portraits. You have to pack everything from a 16mm wide angle to a 400mm telephoto. This is where DSLR technology really excels. I saved a little weight in my luggage by leaving the swimming togs at home – there are too many crocs along the Kimberley coast for a casual swim anyhow.

■ **All in a tangle**
 "Not much sport in catching another bloody barra"



■ **Taking flight**
 For a journey like this, you need a variety of lenses to suit challenging situations



■ **Silky smooth**
 Waterfalls on the Kimberley coast cry out for long, slow exposures



■ **Mary River lotus**
 The perfect backdrop for the Kakadu wetlands ecosystem



■ **Pathway portrait**
It's a landscape paradise – but don't forget your portrait lens

PRO TIP

HOW TO GET THERE

Air Adventure Australia run their journeys out of Melbourne with itineraries covering every state in the country. I liked the outback flying tour so much I decided to go back and run a flying photographic workshop with them in June 2012. airadventure.com.au



■ **Red cliffs at sunrise**
Cruising along the King George River

IMAGES

Pathway portrait

» Shot with Canon 1D MkIV; 1/8000sec; Aperture priority; f/2.0; ISO 100

Red cliffs at sunrise

» Shot with Canon 5D MkII; 1/640sec; Aperture priority; f/9; ISO 800

Sturt desert pea

» Shot with Canon 5D MkII; 1/400sec; Aperture priority; f/4.5; ISO 200

Parachilna parking lot

» Shot with Canon 1D MkIV; 1/250sec; Aperture priority; f/11; ISO 100

Home Valley horse ride

» Shot with Canon 5D MkII; 1/2656sec; Aperture priority; f/2.8; ISO 200

On the Mary River we meet a fishing guide, Ross Hart, who cares more about the bird life of the Top End than he does catching barramundi. Ross tells me, "Not much sport in catching another bloody barra. Anybody can get one of those things on a line. The bird life is what I like to go cruising for, you never know what you might find from one day to the next. If I can get a close look at them jabiru coming in for a landing, and share that with a group of photographers, well, that's a good day's work in my book."

He's not wrong. I've been up to the Top End a dozen times and rarely have I seen such a beautiful location for photographing birds, in the wet or the dry. Boats filled with up to 50 people at a time do laps around the billabongs at Yellow Waters, deep inside Kakadu National Park, but up here we've seen two blokes fishing for the entire morning. Not only do the brolgas outnumber the photographers, but we get up close to a dozen birds species plus a few saltwater crocs. It's good value if you're the kind of photographer who likes to carry a long lens.

With the light of dusk disappearing behind the horizon, I got myself a shot of Ross with a fishing rod in hand. I knew he'd rather be posed next



■ **Sturt desert pea**
SA's floral emblem abounds in central and northwestern Australia

“After two weeks of flying around the outback, I’d covered more destinations than I would have seen in two months”



to a rare rufus owl, but the fact is he's bloody good at catching fish too. Ross saw the humour in it all and asked for a copy to keep.

After two weeks of flying around the outback, I'd covered more destinations than I would have seen in two months, the perfect combination of getting out to remote locations and spending time up close with the locals. Since the 1980s I've driven across Australia on the trail of

photographic inspiration and it turns out I didn't have to. I could have just flown instead.

Without doubt the Australian Outback offers a new landscape opportunity over every horizon, yet the real treasures out in the bush are the people who *live* in the bush. By all means pack a decent camera for sunsets at Uluru, but don't leave your portrait lens behind either.



■ Parachilna parking lot
Not a lot of arguing over spaces...

■ Home Valley horse ride
Indigenous ranch hand Cyril Yeeda epitomises the outback experience